

# THE NATION'S PAWN

By Roy Norton

AUTHOR OF "THE VANISHING FLEETS," ETC.

## Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

While Secretary of State Lester and his official party were returning on board the steamship Brazil from a remarkable tour of the South American republics, the Secretary was nominated for the presidency by the united Conservative, Prohibitionist and Independent parties, and Secretary Lester's one time friend, but now political enemy, Senator Barnes of Ohio, was nominated by the Liberal, Labor and Socialist parties, making certain that the country would be divided into two great political camps for the bitterest campaign of the country's history.

With Secretary Lester on official duty was Captain Dick Barnes, a son of Senator Barnes and the accepted suitor of Secretary Lester's daughter, also on board the Brazil. Before the news of Senator Barnes' nomination had been received, Captain Barnes had been invited to take part in confidential conferences to plan the Lester campaign. Afterward, the young army officer was publicly denounced as a traitor by Secretary Lester's political lieutenants. On the day of his arrival in New York, Captain Barnes discovered that some one impersonating him had given the newspapers an interview purporting to tell in a bravado way how his father's political enemies had been tricked. The interview was published under glaring headlines and the young man denounced.

In the campaign that followed the alleged treachery played a large part, adding to the unhappiness of Captain Barnes and finally resulting in a break between the Captain and Miss Lester at a chance meeting in a Washington cafe immediately after the election. But "Tiger" Reilly, a former Tammany boss, sticks by Barnes and promises to see him through.

The election was so close that the result hinged on the decision of the contest between two sets of delegates from Alaska who raced by sea and land to Washington to establish their claims. While the senate heard the contest, armed men came to Washington by thousands and when it decided in favor of Lester, civil war seemed certain if any effort were made to inaugurate Lester. During the tense situation in Washington, a warning was posted, threatening dire things unless the trouble were peaceably adjusted, and signed mysteriously, "The Nation's Pawn." The warning going unheeded after the first excitement over it, the country was startled on the eve of the inauguration by the mysterious disappearance of President-elect Lester and his vice-president. In spite of this alarming contingency, the two opposing forces continue their warlike activities. The regular army is woefully small in contrast with the great armed camps it seeks to subdue, and utterly unable to check or prevent the impending conflict. At this juncture, another mysterious warning is posted by "The Nation's Pawn," threatening even more astounding acts if the rival parties do not patch up a peace. To complicate matters still more, Japan and China take advantage of the United States' weakness to enforce unreasonable demands, and clouds of war loom up on the Pacific horizon.

## CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

WHEN the president had finished his reading he folded the mysterious letter, placed it in the receptacle, and said wearily: "Gentlemen, it seems to me that we are about to be confronted with all the evils which my friend has suggested."

One after another around the table expressed his views, until it appeared that opinion was almost evenly divided—one portion on advising a conciliatory reply to the United Empire, and, if necessary, a granting of indemnities, while the other was equally insistent that a diplomatic refusal should be given. The president was the last man to speak. He had sat quietly throughout the debate, his eyes glowing, his lips compressed. Aged, distressed and worn as he was, the spark of greatness which had made him the honored president of the nation flared up again as he stood upon his feet and brought his open palm down upon the table with soft, emphatic taps.

"I have heard you and for once I am going to take upon myself the responsibility of overruling every opinion which has been expressed. I am going to deny any obligation on the part of the United States for anything which has passed; to reassert that there will be no let-down whatever in the bars of immigration, and that, if these terms be not satisfactory, the United Empire of China and Japan is at liberty to take such action as it deems best. I cannot find it in my heart to believe that America is yet so helpless and so puny that she cannot govern herself, and at the same time prevent others from intimidating her."

The officers of the cabinet looked at one another doubtfully for a moment; then they appeared to become conscious of the fact that they had showed signs of weakness at a critical moment. Almost in unison, they gave enthusiastic approval and support to the president, who still stood at the head of the table. He sat down suddenly, as if the spark of vitality, which had flamed so brightly as a reminder of the man he had been—now being killed by inches under the terrific strain put upon him—were in its last expiring glow. He was not aware, nor were those others, that this was to be almost the last official act of his career.

The members of the cabinet dispersed, after bidding one another good night, and were surprised to find the morning hours approaching. But they were not the only ones who had spent a wakeful night. Only a short time after their meeting broke up, another party of almost the same number of men was making its way through the Washington mist to the big railway station, to meet the incoming flyer from the west. In their anxiety to be there on time, they arrived several minutes before the train was due, and stood together in a quiet group, with the collars of their overcoats turned up and their hats drawn over their eyes, as if not courting identification from any curious ones who might be in the vicinity.

The great place was silent and almost deserted. Not a train was standing in it, and the lights flashing through the fog showed vistas of wet, unoccupied rails. Off to one side, the clink of inspectors' hammers, as they tapped their way

along the tires, sounded mellow and muffled in the quietude of the morning. An old-fashioned switch-engine, propelled by steam, puffed noisily out in the distance, and the occasional clash of bumping freight cars gave proof that the commerce of the nation was not wholly dead. Two grease-covered men, carrying flaming torches, passed by the group as if going to some other place of duty. A few more expectant individuals, waiting to meet arrivals on the incoming train, gathered here and there in drowsy, yawning inertness, or paced slowly backward and forward the big illuminated clock face in the shed, and one station attendant called to another, his voice sounding harsh and loud, as if the weather had penetrated his vocal chords:

"She's on time to the second, Jack, as usual. Get your trunks out."

EVERY one on the platform now consulted watches or the clock, and began to look expectantly at the dim steel network which led off into, and was seemingly swallowed by, the fog. The white light of an electric locomotive suddenly tore through it with terrifying stillness, and the flyer dashed into the station, its air-brakes shrieking a painful crescendo as they fought with the wheels and brought the Pullmans to a standstill. The group of men whose hats were pulled over their eyes hurried back to the rear of the train, where a special car was barred off from intruders by upraised platforms and iron grill work. The car was dark, and even its porter was evidently asleep, because he did not appear to throw back the gates and free the steps.

"Must be sleeping pretty soundly," one of the party said impatiently, shaking the gate with his hands. Still, there was no response.

"Here, Tom, let me climb aboard and rap on the door," another man said. "I'm the youngest in the crowd."

He clambered over the barrier, the mackintosh coat which he wore giving out scraping sounds as he thrust it aside. He rapped loudly on the door, and leaned his head forward, listening for a response. He rapped again more energetically, and boisterously turned the door knob backward and forward. Still, there was no answer.

"Let's go to the rear, and try the back door," a voice suggested. "The youngest man" leaped to the station platform, led the way alongside the darkened car, and crawled up into the observation verandah behind. This time, he rapped on the door but once, then put his hand on the knob and tried it. The door swung open, and he stepped inside, calling as he did so, in a half-whimsical way, "Don't shoot. It's only a humble man who isn't as sound asleep as you all seem



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to be."

Those outside heard him call, "Hello! Hello! I say! What's the matter here?" Then, there was the snap and flare of a hastily ignited match, another exclamation; and he came running out to the rear, and leaned over the railing. He shook both hands rapidly almost in their faces, and shouted:

"My God, the car's empty! There's not a soul in it! And what's more, the electric lights won't work, and the beds haven't been occupied. What does it mean? What does it mean?" His voice wandered off inanely in an excess of excitement, and the others crowded past him, to search for themselves and to be convinced that there was no mistake.

Afterward, they ran out pell-mell toward the dispatcher's office, one man reiterating as they did so:

"I know he was aboard. I know he was aboard, because his secretary wired me after the train had started that he had seen both Barnes and Rutherford safely off, and that he himself was following on a later train."

They controlled themselves as they gained the dispatcher's office, and their leader asked:

"Can you tell me whether the train which just came in stopped anywhere between Cleveland and Washington?"

"The conductor reports not," the dispatcher replied. "You might ask him yourself: that's him standing right over there."

THE man in uniform turned around at the words, with a brief, "What is it?" They repeated the question, and, as if the bare thought of such an unprecedented thing were an insult, he answered emphatically: "No, sirree! Certainly not! The train wouldn't stop between terminals if the president himself wanted to get aboard."

Something in the appearance of the man before him caused him to assume a more conciliatory manner, and, in obedience to the spokesman's request, he followed them out and alongside the track, suspecting that something of grave importance had occurred. He stopped and held his lantern up before his interlocutor's face. "See here," he said, "who are you? I don't